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Mr Lee's lasting legacy: A S'pore that continues to thrive

BY

[EUGENE K B TAN](#)

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Life goes on, a year since Mr Lee Kuan Yew's passing. This is a reflection of the evolution and adaptability of the Lee Kuan Yew governance model since he stood down as Prime Minister in 1990.

Yet, while policies, laws and approach to governance may have worked well during his tenure (1959-1990), some may not today. After all, Singapore is a very different society today from the Singapore that Mr Lee handed over to his successors. The world, to which Singapore is so intimately connected, is also very different in the 21st century.

We are, however, unlikely to see major shifts in governance in the near future. There will be policy changes over time, due to circumstances, environment (internal and external) and political imperatives. It is not a question of whether, but rather when and how. The "text" of Mr Lee's governance model has to adapt and remain relevant to the changing "context" of Singapore.

Nonetheless, the governance model today and in the future will have some degree of path dependence on the policies and vision created and developed by Mr Lee and his founding generation of leaders with the support of the Pioneer Generation of Singaporeans.

With the foundation laid, the current and future leadership will have to strengthen it, ensuring that governance continues to be relevant, responsive and resilient.

After Mr Lee retired as Prime Minister, there was the perception that he still called the shots and that he was governing through proxies.

There was none of those in my view. He did not need proxies; neither did he have to hold on to the reins of power. The impact of his influence, the force of his ideas and the charisma of his personality meant that his successors had to have better and more workable ideas if they wanted to ditch the prevailing model.

Mr Lee's deep influence on the younger leaders is often mistaken as his lording over them. For sure, there was due deference accorded to Mr Lee's point of view. But it was not out of fear or subservience.

In any case, the fundamentals and policy non-negotiables have been tried and tested. They will have to be continually evaluated if governance is to remain robust and fit for purpose.

NO MORE STRONG STATESMAN

For policies closely identified with Mr Lee such as meritocracy, multiracialism, bilingualism, zero tolerance of corruption, and a tough stance on racial and religious tensions, these continue even if they have to be tweaked periodically to ensure their effectiveness and efficacy. There is significant buy-in within the political leadership and Singaporeans for those policies and principles.

For our sovereignty and prosperity, Mr Lee believed that Singapore has to be an exceptional country. There is no alternative.

We thrive by being different in a purposive way. For example, we make good governance a necessity, we are open economically, we transform our weaknesses — like the lack of water-sufficiency and natural resources — into strengths.

This drive to be exceptional is something Singapore cannot afford not to have — for our survival in the earlier days and for our future prosperity.

In this regard, Singapore has to remain open to immigrants, trade, foreign investments, ideas and information. Openness is our lifeblood, a point Mr Lee appreciated from the outset. We can opt out, but that would be a sure path to irrelevance in the global economy.

The challenges that Singapore faces today are no different from those when Mr Lee held the fort but we are now better resourced and more cohesive than we were fifty years ago.

Among them are the need to continue to nurture honest, committed and able leaders to ensure Singapore's well-being and place in the world. Managing people's expectations is another major challenge given the progress made while at the same time, citizens have not been severely tested in terms of resolve, resilience and resourcefulness. Governance also needs to rise to the challenge of having Singaporeans' full-hearted support.

Mr Lee and his team had been concerned with growing the nation's wealth — outcomes were more important then.

Now the process of governance is as, if not more, important than outcomes. The “how” questions have grown in importance compared to Mr Lee's time: for example, how do we ensure the nation's wealth is fairly shared?

We have had the benefit of a “long transition” — 1990 to 2015 — between Mr Lee stepping down from the helm and his passing.

For 21 years, he continued to play a key role as Senior Minister and then Minister Mentor, mindful not to take the limelight away from his successors, and extending Singapore's sphere of influence and economic space through his role on the international stage.

Mr Lee presided over the ruling PAP's one-party dominance. With his passing, the era of the strong statesman is probably over in Singapore politics.

Yet, with last September's strong showing in the first general election since 1959 without Mr Lee as a candidate, the ruling PAP showed that it had the tenacity and guile to maintain its grip on power. With the important victory, the PAP's political dominance looks set to continue for another decade. Mr Lee was also aware that the desire for political competition and diversity was growing but he sought to manage the pace of political change. The knuckle-duster approach to politics, a hallmark of Mr Lee, is not shared by Singaporeans born post-independence.

Similarly, Singaporeans have imbibed the good governance mantra and tacitly recognised that high standards of probity and performance must be maintained.

The one week in March last year was a hugely poignant period in our collective consciousness. A powerful and inspiring force is gone but there was and is no panic, fear or uncertainty that we are the worse off for it.

Mr Lee's biggest legacy to Singapore is to have Singapore thriving even after his passing. A Singapore that cannot endure and thrive beyond Mr Lee would be an indictment of his leadership and legacy.

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